RIVAL WIVES

by Annie Annette Author of "The Black Dispatch"

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

It was 6 o'clock when Nan Morgan, in a tempest of unreasoning fury and fear, locked her doors against any attempt her husband might make to bring to her his load of despair and newly revived love for his first wife.

"She shan't haunt this room, too, as she does every other room in the house!" Nan sobbed.

She was trembling with the fury of her own determination, but her ears betrayed her by straining to catch the faintest sound which would indicate that he was trying to come to her. After many minutes she heard him open his door. Breathlessly she waited, savagely eager to have him turn the knob of her door and find it locked.

She herself was suffering so terribly that it gave her a fierce, perverse pleasure to think of his being hurt, too. Kneeling down before that woman who had never loved him and who had deserted him! Nan clenched her hands as her eyes stared at the doorknob. Going to the hospital twice in one day to see her, when she wasn't really sick at all, but just shamming to win his sympathy! He'd always been wax in Iris' hands. Well, let him be hurt now! It would serve him right. She had been hurt enough. God knew!....But her straining eyes told Nan that he had not touched the knob of her door.

She heard water running; faint, familiar sounds which told her he was getting out his shaving things. She could see every step of the process as if she were in the bathroom beside him. The way he stretched his upper lip in a comical grimace; the brooding gravity in his deep-set black eyes, which saw nothing funny in the facial contortions a man makes when he shaves himself. The infinite care with which he circled the safety razor about the little brown mole on his right cheek. Oh! Nan caught her breath in agony. It was terrible to love a man so much. Only this morning she had stood close beside him as he shaved, so close that his elbow joggled her ribs and made her double up in a childish fit of giggling. And now—now....

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She waited until she heard him reenter his own room, then with a great effort, Nan went about her own dressing for dinner. The amber chiffon. He liked it, but why try to please him now? He wouldn't notice what she had on. His eyes would be turned in upon a vision of Iris, lying in appealing helpfulness upon a hospital bed, her fragility clothed in an exquisitely colored, subtly scented negligee.

Even as her hairbrush gave furious punctuation to her defiance, Nan knew, deep down in her heart, that if John Curtis Morgan wanted her to relinquish him to his first wife, she would do so. He would be the last court of appeal. If he decided against her, there would be no fight left in her.

She did not descend the stairs until she had heard her husband go down, slowly, like an old man. It was their custom to assemble in the drawing room, there to wait for Estelle's summons to the dining room. It took all her courage to cross the threshold, and so strong had been her premonition of what she would find when she did so that she felt no surprise, only an overwhelming despair.

John Curtis Morgan and his son stood before the fireplace, looking absurdly like each other, in spite of the difference in their sizes. Consciously or unconsciously, Curtis had duplicated his father's pose—feet planted wide apart, hands thrust into trousers pockets, shoulders hunched, head lowered, but eyes raised to Iris Morgan's breathtakingly beautiful portrait. How closely kin those two were! Father and son, by virtue of the woman at whose picture they gazed.

Nan was powerless to move toward them. She was an interloper. It would be indecent to intrude upon their tragic brooding. All fight melted out of her for the moment, giving way to a nauseating self-hatred. If she had not "wormed her way" into John Curtis Morgan's home, into his grief, into the affections of his son, so that marriage with her had come to seem inevitable he and the child would have been free to welcome Iris home. What did it matter that they had been better off without her? If they preferred sickness to health, misery to peace. Iris to Nan, why shouldn't they have them? People never thanked you for doing things for their good.

"Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Morgan, I didn't know you was there," Estelle apologized as she almost bumped into the frozen little figure in the doorway. "Dinner is served ma'am."

The two before the fireplace started, the man guiltily. The 7-year-old boy stared at Nan as if he had never seen her before, a strange hostility in his liquid black eyes. There was a deep flush on his cheeks. Nan's heart contracted sharply with anxiety. Did he have a fever? Why was he staring at her like that? Had Iris already begun to poison the child against her? But why ask? She had known Iris was going to fight her with every weapon she could lay hands on, and of course the child would be the most potent, next to the terrific appeal which she had always made to the senses of the man she never loved and had deserted.

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"Hello, dear!" her husband greeted her constrainedly, as he came forward to take her arm. "Sorry I couldn't meet you for lunch."

"How did the trial progress? Any jurors chosen?" Nan asked, with apparently cheerful casualness.

"We went to the hospital to see my mother," Curtis cut in, his voice sounding oddly mature and childishly belligerent. She—"

"Nan asked me a question, son," the father reproved him sternly, but laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Haven't you seen the afternoon paper, Nan? The trial is adjourned until January 9."

No need now to pretend interest. Nan cried: "Adjourned? Why? What happened? You don't mean Brainerd wasn't ready? Or do you suppose he'd got wind of what we're going to spring?"

Morgan was obviously grateful for her interest and for a chance to think and talk of something else besides the amazing return of his divorced wife. He drew out a chair for Nan with his usual meticulous politeness as he answered:

"Oh, no, nothing like that. We were impanneling the jury, had agreed on four men, when about 3 o'clock this afternoon, Brainerd got word that his star witness, the butler, Edgars, had been stricken with acute appendicitis and rushed to the hospital for an emergency operation. He's in pretty bad shape, I understand. Naturally the trial couldn't proceed without him, and Judge Bunce granted an adjournment until the old man is in a condition to be brought to the courtroom—if he survives."

"Good heavens!" Nan said slowly. "It will be more of a blow for us if the poor old man dies than for the prosecution."

"True," Morgan agreed. "But still we have the goods on Nina Blackhull, even without the butler's testimony as to her relations with the chauffeur, Bassett. But naturally what he was willing to tell us on cross examination would have been mighty important. Brainerd, of course, can use Edgars' testimony before the grand jury, as to Blackhull's quarrel with David the boy's leaving in his car at 2 o'clock in the morning, and the finding of his body. I hope we'll have our chance at him, though."

"Where is he—which hospital?" Nan demanded, as she made a pretense of eating her soup.

"He's at St. Luke's too, where Mother is," Curtis answered the question. "Father went to talk to the doctor about him while I stayed with Mother." Again that curious, direct glance of hostility from the black eyes which had been so full of love as late as this morning.

"Yes," Morgan agreed, flushing and lowering his eyes. "They were operating them. No one could say how it would turn out, but a few minutes ago I telephoned the hospital and the poor old man has come out of the ether all right. If there are no serious complications he'll pull through, Dr. Matthews says."

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"I'm glad," Nan said in a low voice. There seemed to be nothing else to add, nothing whatever to talk about.

For Iris was as much a member of that constrained group as if she sat on the vacant fourth side of the table. Nan felt that the insolent blue-green eyes were mocking them all.

"Don't want any spinach and carrots-and-peas," Curtis said suddenly, violently thrusting aside the vegetable dish from which Estelle was about to serve him.

Morgan snapped out of a period of brooding abstraction to frown upon his son. "Eat what's put before you, Curtis," he commanded sternly.

"I won't!" Curtis shouted, the feverish flush deepening alarmingly on the face which had once been so thin and anemic and now was plump with health. "Mother says I don't have to eat things I don't like! 'Sides, she give me all the chocolates I wanted out of that big box you took her. I aren't hungry!"

Morgan seemed glad of the chance to show furious anger. The two were so alike and yet so different glared at each other. "Then leave the table!" the father ordered savagely. "And go straight to bed. You know you're not permitted to eat between meals and that—"

The child's howl of rage cut across his father's furious rebuke.

Involuntarily, Nan reached out a hand and laid it soothingly upon Curtis' clenched fist. "Please, John! Let me....Curtis, darling, you don't want to lose your gold star for a perfect Health Chart, do you? If you aren't hungry, you can skip dessert, but Nan does want you to eat the vegetables—"

"Won't eat them!" Curtis screamed, pushing his plate so violently that part of the food spilled upon the immaculate white cloth. "Don't have to do what you tell me to! You ain't got any right to boss me! Mother says—"

"Go to your room!" his father roared, rising and bending over the child as if his clenched fists longed to strike him. "And stay there till you're ready to apologize to Nan and to promise to obey her implicitly. Do you understand?"

Nan shrank into her chair, every nerve outraged by the scene, the like of which had never taken place in that home since she had become its mistress. Helplessly, she watched the child scramble out of his chair and run howling from the room.

"I'm sorry, Nan," Morgan apologized stiffly, extreme pallor suddenly taking the place of the flush of anger.

Nan nodded dumbly and the miserable meal progressed in silence. Dishes were brought and removed, their delicious contents scarcely touched by either. It came to an end at last and the two who had been so close moved together, but miles apart, toward the drawing room.

For a few minutes they talked constrainedly, unnaturally, about the Blackhull case, then abruptly Morgan introduced the only subject about which neither of them could think:

"I—Nan, we'd better face this thing, hadn't we? I've got to talk to you about Iris."

(To be continued)

TROTZKY IRATE AT "PRESS LIES"

PRINKIPO, Prince's Edward Island, Turkey.—(AP)—To his hatred for Stalin, who banished him from Russia, and his hatred for Germany, which refused him admittance, Leon Trotzky, exiled Bolshevist chieftain, has added another hate. This time it is for the press of the world.

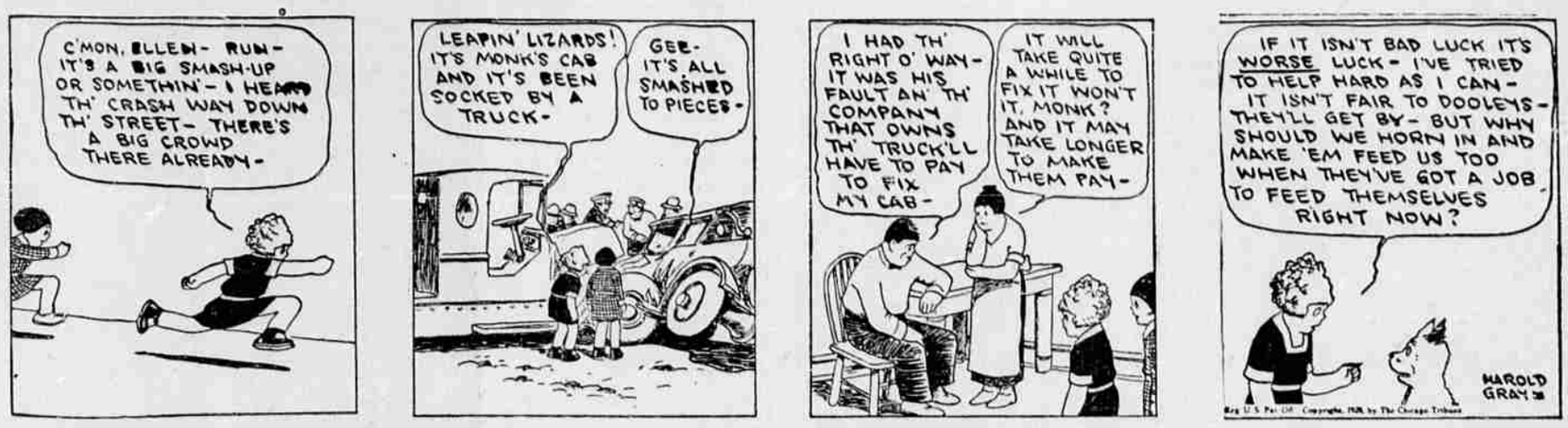
It was not always thus. When he emerged from his month of virtual imprisonment in the soviet consulate in Stamboul to the more loquacious atmosphere of a Pera hotel, he had much to say and said it willingly. But when reporters sought to learn what he hoped to do in England he locked the doors of his rented villa in this fashionable Stamboul summer resort.

Paris to Rebuild Old Boulevards

PARIS.—(AP)—The physiognamy of Paris has completely changed since the war and the Grand Boulevards have been so altered as to be practically unrecognizable. From the Opera to the Madeleine not more than three or four buildings exist which stood there in 1914.

New hotels, business houses and office buildings have been erected. Two or three of the old and renowned cafes have disappeared to make room for commercial structures.

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE — The Worst Arrives — By HAROLD GRAY



SALESMAN SAM — Uncle Sam's Are Better! — By SMALL

BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES — The Blaze Spreads — By MARTIN

MOM'N POP — Pop Has All The Ear Marks — By COWAN

OUR BOARDING HOUSE — By AHERN

THE TINYMITES — By KNICK

THE Tinies, still within their cloud stood quiet, with their wee heads bowed. They'd come so close up to the sun its heat was mighty bad. It seemed it was so dazzling bright that they were scared to risk their sight. "Don't look at it," warned Scouty, "for the outcome might be sad."

Another whispered, "Mercy me, I tried to, and I couldn't see. I feel just like I'm burning and I think we'd better jump. If we stay here we'll melt away, and we are foolish if we stay. We'll either roast or fall to earth. I'd rather get a bump."

Then Scouty loudly cried, "Not yet! There may be some way we can get away from this terrific heat. Let's crawl into the cloud. It's just as soft as it can be. Come on, you Tinies, follow me." The Tinies didn't argue. They were quite a willing crowd.

Inside the cloud they crawled real quick. At first they thought it was quite slick, but then the heat came after them and spoiled their clever thought. So, out they came, and Carpy cried, "It does no good to stay inside. If we don't jump into the air it's certain we are caught."

All of a sudden Clowny shook another Tiny, crying. "Look! Here comes a great big dark cloud. Oh, I hope it is full of rain. A shower right now would feel just great. Just think! Why, I can hardly wait." The Tinies then yelled to the cloud, and it was not in vain.

The cloud passed underneath the sun and eyed the Tinies, one by one. "I guess it's well I came along. You all look quite afraid," said Mister Black Cloud to the bunch. "I've saved you all, I have a hunch. The sun can no more cook you, 'cause I've put you in the shade."

(Read the Story, th en color the picture)

(The Tinymites return to earth in the next story)

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